

Child Counseling

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James is a student at Premier Elementary School. Today was our first therapy session. James had been counseled by another therapist from my office but was discharged approximately one month ago after deciding that much of James' behavior was age-appropriate and that the school and parents could teach him the necessary skills to address his negative behavior. The parents and school staff believe that James was discharged from counseling prematurely because his negative behavior at school continues and his older brother allegedly molested him in the shower shortly before he was discharged from counseling. Parents and school staff report that James is hyperactive and a "sore loser." He responds to challenging situations with curse words, and he has been known to push or hit other children. They are also concerned that his behavior may have been detrimentally influenced by the experience with his older brother. James did have a forensic interview regarding the molestation several weeks ago just after the incident was reported and his brother was removed from the home.

Goals of the Session

I met James for the first time in what appeared to be a storage/visitor room at Premier Elementary. I felt our first session should be focused on getting to know each other and building rapport. When James and I get to know each other a little better, I plan to work on grounding techniques and self-regulation skills. I decided that I would not press James to speak of his alleged molestation, but rather let him speak of his experiences with his family as he felt comfortable and if he chose to do so.

Skills Utilized

To this first session, I brought with me matchbox cars and magnet people, which are small plastic figurines that have magnets on their hands and feet. I told James that whatever toys

he wanted to use and how he wanted to play with them was okay. James played with both during the session but started with the cars. I utilized active listening and play therapy techniques. I was also attentive to nonverbal cues. After our introduction, I gave no further suggestions or instructions and let him take the lead. He described what he was doing as he was doing it and asked me to join in on his play on several occasions. He was respectful and appeared very intuitive and observant. He said very little about his family but did mention he missed his brother. I reflected on his comment about missing his brother, James did not respond, and he said nothing more on the subject for the remainder of our time together.

When our session started I (Frances) said to James, "I brought a couple of different kinds of toys I thought you might like." James responded, "Oooo, cars, these, I'll play with these." I (Frances) tracked, "You like cars." James responded, "Yes, I have lots of them at home and I help my dad fix cars." I (Frances) reflected, "Wow, you know how to fix real cars." James, "Yes, my dad teaches me. He taught my brother too. (Pause). I miss him." I (Frances) reflected, "You miss your brother?" James, "Yeah. He's staying at his grandpa's." I (Frances) reflected incorrectly, "He is staying with your grandparents?" James did not respond; instead, he shifted his goal in play.

James moved around the room and utilized the table, chairs, and filing cabinet as he shifted his play to include other parts of the room. James, "I'm making a bridge." I (Frances) reflected, "You're building a bridge?" James, "Can you help me put them together to make a bridge? Hold this side." I (Frances) returned responsibility to James, "You want me to hold these here, but I don't think I can make them stay, you will have to do it." James, "See, like this, then I can put the other end here." (James connected the chain of magnet people on one end to the file cabinet and the other end to the back metal part of the chair.) James, "I'm going to drive

on the bridge.” I, (Frances) tracked, “Wow you built a bridge?” James, “Aaargh, the bridge broke. Oh well.” I (Frances) reflected empathetically and then reminded him of the time, “Oh booger, the bridge broke. Just to let you know, I will have to leave in 10 minutes.” James, “OK.” (F. Romero Thomas, therapeutic communication, February 15, 2024).

Stage of Development

James is eight years old. This age places him in the middle childhood stage of development. Jean Piaget describes this stage as Concrete Operational. In this stage, James is developing organized and rational thinking. (McLeod, S., 2024). In this stage of development cisgender boys such as James “demonstrate more externalized emotions...and their fears are related to real-life...issues.” (Vernon, 2024, p. 14). This stage also falls into Lawrence Kohlberg’s stage of morality where James is focused on being a good boy and his decisions are based on pleasing authority figures. (Cherry, K., 2022). Because he is focused on pleasing authority, he is not too concerned about what those who he deems as having less power than him feel. The negative behavior noted by school staff and parents is, as his previous mental health counselor noted, normal for his stage of development. However, it is important to help James develop appropriate emotional growth as it is predictive of school success. (Vernon, 2024). Although the school and parents may be capable of helping James learn self-regulation skills and appropriate responses to negative emotions, continuing counseling at present also seems appropriate because I don’t know enough to revert responsibility to his parents and school after his alleged sexual molestation.

Theory and Technique

I am hoping to utilize a person-centered approach to therapy as I work with James. Person-centered theory was developed by Carl Rogers who believed that people could

understand themselves and reach their optimal selves with the help of a counselor who could exhibit unconditional acceptance of that person. (Capuzzi and Stauffer, 2016). I believe this perspective in counseling can be applied to clients of any age. I am choosing to work with James using a person-centered approach with a focus on rational emotive behavioral therapy (REBT). REBT is focused on the interconnectedness of thinking, feeling, and behaving. This interconnectedness if not correctly addressed can create difficulties as Capuzzi and Stauffer explain:

“Fundamental to REBT is the notion that people’s contradictory nature, along with their social upbringing, not only impels them to create happier and more fulfilling lives, but also encourages them to elevate strong goals, desires, and preferences into absolutistic and unrealistic shoulds, oughts, and musts that lead to emotional and behavioral difficulties.... These shoulds, oughts, and musts fall under three main categories: self-demandingness, other demandingness, and world demandingness.... Self-demandingness “refers to the idea that one must always perform well and win others’ approval; if one does not, one is incompetent, is unworthy, and deserves to suffer. Self-hatred, anxiety, and depression often result from self-demandingness.” (p. 286).

James’ responses to situations where he views himself as the loser appear to imply that he is focused on self-demandingness. When James loses, he gets angry and lashes out at those around him to possibly avoid the self-criticalness that may accompany the noted feelings of incompetence and unworthiness. I would like to teach James that feeling negative emotions after losing is ok. With that, I would also like for him to learn that losing does not diminish your value as a person. Learning that there is a difference between healthy negative emotions (HNEs) and

unhealthy negative emotions (UNEs) could help him understand this perspective. (Ackerman, C.E., 2023).

Applicability to Diverse Populations

James is not the only child in the world, or even in his school, who has exhibited negative behavior when losing a game. REBT is a flexible counseling process that can be used with men, women, children, and people of various cultures. REBT is a person-centered, “evidence-based approach that can help members understand and change self-defeating thoughts and behaviors, recognize the consequences of their choices, and identify personal strengths that help them solve their problems.” (Vernon and Schimmel, 2024, p. 474). Learning to accept the circumstances of our limitations comes from how we view the situation in the first place. Such as in James’ situation, losing a game does not, in itself, create a detrimental circumstance. It is how we view that loss that creates the thought that it is a detrimental circumstance. Learning how to express disappointment in a healthy way is the basis of REBT. (Capuzzi and Stauffer, 2016).

Reflection of Strengths/Weaknesses

I feel that I have a good rapport with children in general and I can build relationships with them fairly easily. The relationship-building session with James went well overall; his mother told me that he seemed to enjoy the session. She added that I appeared to give James “a grandma vibe.” Even though the session went well, and I felt comfortable with James for the most part, I have to admit that I lack confidence in my therapeutic ability. I fear I don’t know enough, and it scares me that I might say or do the wrong thing or choose a technique that doesn’t apply to a particular client. Like many others, I tend to be a creature of habit; I repeat things I am comfortable with. I fear that I may make mistakes with clients due to my tendency to

repeat, knowing that not every therapeutic technique is the right technique for every client.
(Nemko, M., 2020).

What would I do differently?

There was one specific thing that made me question whether or not I did the right thing when working with James. I noticed that James took a few extra minutes before saying anything after this particular incident. He asked me how old I was, and I didn't know if I should answer him and instead waited for his next comment. It seemed to bother him that I didn't give him an answer. I think his question surprised me and I hesitated. In retrospect, I should have just answered his question. It appeared this was information he needed to be comfortable with me.

References

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